

2650: *To the Royal Government of Upper Bavaria*

Munich
July 6, 1858

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Royal Government of Upper Bavaria!

Acceptance of African Girls by Convents of Women Religious

Reference to Royal Government Resolution No. 42752/47552 of June 26, 1858
(received July 5)

Complying with the royal directives regarding the above, the respectfully undersigned submits the following statement to the royal government:

Approximately three years ago, when there was a question of bringing some African girls to Bavaria in order to teach them Christianity, win them for the reign of God, and save their souls, the Poor School Sisters were also asked whether they, like other convents here and abroad, would accept some of these girls for the love of God. We agreed to accept seven. A short time later, they arrived in the most pitiful condition. Fr. [Niccolò] Oliviere bought them at a slave market in Cairo in order to help them save their immortal souls.¹

Court Chaplain [Joseph Ferdinand] Müller from Munich,² who is benevolent and zealous for all things good, immediately provided what was needed for some of these children, and the religious institute accepted the others at its own expense. The religious institute asked absolutely no one to take up a collection or to provide for their support in any way. As prescribed by the Church, we looked for godparents for their baptism and confirmation.³ Since people of every class, even members of the royalty,⁴ were involved in this work of charity and immediately took great interest in these African children, the undersigned did not think she was doing anything wrong and, in truth, she never intended to violate any law by this action.⁵

From the beginning, the children's support depended entirely on the mercy of God. This will be the case even more in the future due to the recent death of the outstanding

missionary to Africa, Fr. Knoblechter,⁶ who began negotiations with us about an African mission of Poor School Sisters when he accompanied these girls here.⁷

We have several institutes in America. If God allows these children to live long enough, perhaps all of them could be taken there. Our climate does not seem to agree with them.

This is the extent of the respectfully undersigned's knowledge of the entire situation.

Respectfully yours,

M. Theresa of Jesus

Letters of Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, translation and notes by Mary Ann Kuttner, SSND, vol. 4, *Vigorous Growth, 1853-1858* (Elm Grove, Wisconsin, 2009), 229-232.

1. Fr. Niccolò Oliviere (1792-1864) founded the Project for the Ransom of African Enslaved Girls in 1838. He ransomed a total of 810 girls from slave markets in Alexandria, Cairo, and Izmir and, despite great hardship, succeeded in bringing them to Europe. In 1855, Fr. Oliviere brought 33 children to the mission in the Au Suburb where they stayed until they were accompanied to various convents in Bavaria. See Maria Magdalena Zunker, OSB, "Drei 'arme Mohrenkinder' in der Benediktinerinnenabtei St. Walburg, Eichstätt: Eine Spurensuche," *Studien und Mitteilungen zur Geschichte des Benediktinerordens und seiner Zweige*, 114 (2003): 481-529.

2. Joseph Ferdinand Müller (1803-1864) was appointed royal court chaplain in Munich and business manager of the Louis Mission Society in 1841. After he left the society in 1854, Fr. Müller continued to distribute donations for the African children's ransom and travel and organized their placement in various convents. In a letter to the prioress of the Dominican Holy Cross Convent in Regensburg, he wrote: "The girls, eight to ten years old, are all very talented. They will be prepared for missionary service in either America or Africa or for household duties, each according to her skills and talents. The children speak Arabic but they will learn German quickly and can go to school with the other children." See Zunker, *Mohrenkinder*, 495.

3. According to the baptismal records from *Mariahilf* Church in the Au Suburb, six girls were baptized in 1856. Senab from Ethiopia, age 9, was baptized by Court Chaplain Mueller on January 18 and given the name Frances. On May 18, Canon George Reindl baptized Sara Zelle from Khartoum, age 11, who was given the name Caroline; Valentina Nassra from Gugitscha, age 11, who was given the name Rosa; Elisabetta Escha from Barno, age 13, who was given the name Catherine; Adelaide Vanda from Barno, age 8, who was given the name Helene; and Theresa Gadanche from Darfur, age 8, who was given the name Isabella. The children were named after their sponsors, women of the nobility or the upper middle class who took a special interest in the children. See *Copia Publica*, 4405-06.

4. According to later accounts, Queen Marie visited the African children several times and enjoyed playing and dancing with them. She also had a portrait of Sara (Caroline) Zelle painted, which was later placed in the National Museum. See Schindlbeck, *Vom Orden*, 209.

5. Fr. Oliviere and those who collaborated with him were suspected of dealing in the slave trade, and since slavery was illegal, it was very difficult to bring the children into Europe. See Zunker, *Mohrenkinder*, 493.

6. Ignatius Knoblecher (1819-58) was born in Slovenia. He was ordained in Rome in 1845 and then sent to help open the first mission in the newly established Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa. After studying the culture and language of the land, the missionaries arrived in Khartoum in February 1848 and opened a Catholic mission with a chapel, school, and living quarters. Sons of European traders and African boys were taught together in the school. The African boys had been ransomed from the slave markets and were given an education. A few of these boys continued their education in Europe.

Fr. Knoblecher was intent on exploring the territory and writing meticulous diaries and notes about what he found. A linguist, he learned some of the native languages and compiled dictionaries in Bari and Denka. He returned to Europe in 1858, but became ill and died in Naples on April 13. After Fr. Knoblecher's death, the mission stations he founded in what is now Sudan were closed for many years.

7. According to a report in the *Pastoralblatt* of the diocese of Eichstätt, the African children were sent to convents in Italy, France, and Germany where they would be given a Catholic education so that, if possible, they could later return to their native country as "missionary deaconesses in Central Africa under the direction of the Poor School Sisters." See Zunker, *Mohrenkinder*, 500.